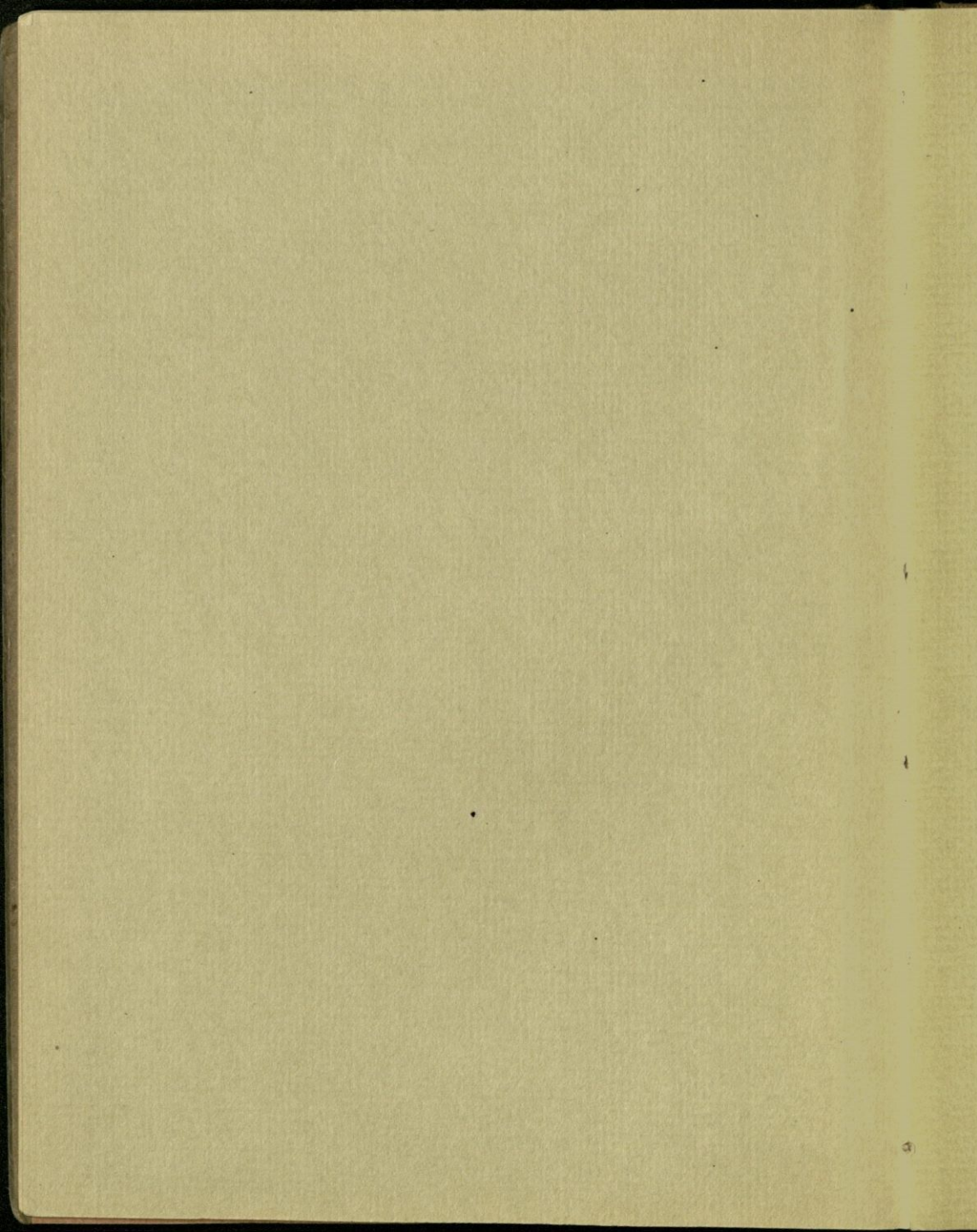


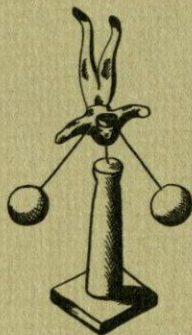
# ***Mexican Folk Puppets***





**MEXICAN**  
**FOLK PUPPETS**  
*Traditional and Modern*

Drawings by Lola Cueto  
Text by Roberto Lago



1941

**PUPPETRY IMPRINTS**  
155 Wimbeldon Drive, Birmingham, Michigan



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Mexico can pride itself on a long tradition of puppets and puppeteers. Certainly they date before the time of the coming of Cortes. For Fray Bernardino de Sahagún has passed on to us a story relating to the Toltec Indians, to which insufficient importance has been attached; it is a valuable piece of evidence for the history of puppets in America. He wrote, in his *Historia de las Cosas de la Nueva España*, "Another trick of the said necromancer was this: seating himself in the middle of the marketplace at Tianquitzli, he announced that his name was Tlacavepan, otherwise Ocexcoch, and proceeded to make a tiny figure dance in the palm of his hands. Seeing this, the Toltecs all arose and went to watch him . . . The necromancer then questioned the Toltecs, saying, 'What manner of trick is this? Ha, why do you not understand it?' "



We can infer that the little figure was some sort of a puppet; at least it was not unlike the string-operated figures employed by the medicine-men in other parts of North America to command the marveling respect of the uninitiated, figures which existed before the arrival of the European. The rationalizing, realistic spirit of the Spaniard destroyed the mystery which surrounded these half-religious puppets, much as it stamped out ancient Mexico's animistic beliefs, which imbued with separate souls every mountain, tree, and object. Today when one sees, in San Juan de Letrán street in Mexico City, a crowd gathered around a showman jiggling a little wooden skeleton on the pavement, one finds only curiosity, a desire to discover how it works, and nothing of the rapt awe of our ancestors, as they might have watched such a performance.

With the arrival of the Spaniards, in Cortes' expedition there came a man clever in sleight of hand who, to the sound of sackbut and dulcimer, worked puppets. He was a symbol, this puppeteer, of the hand of authority, the hand that was to rule the Indians and make them mere creatures on strings. But—the year was 1524—he preceded European actors by some fourteen years.

While Indian puppetry disappeared, the puppets of the Spaniard began to flourish. In 1569 one Juan de Samora petitioned the town of Tezcoco to permit him to play during the Lenten season three puppet shows, which would give no cause for the gentry to blush. By 1734 puppet shows had appeared at Morelia. In the town of Pátzcuaro there was a skilled puppet maker as early as 1740; he was involved in a lawsuit against the maker of a powder which was supposed to help win in a cockmain. And in the year of grace 1764, the actors of the Teatro Principal complained to the city council in the Capital of the unfair competition of the puppet companies; they were so popular that the flesh-and-blood actors suffered from neglect. The strangest case of all is found in the records of 1786, when four regular puppet theatres were running in Mexico City, and the actors of the municipal theatre slighted their work in order to play in one of them after hours!

During the nineteenth century there was no diminution in the puppets' fame. In his *Memorias* Guillermo Prieto speaks of a puppet show which drew the children like a Pied Piper; this was about 1830. The puppet characters were Mexican types



like Juan Panadero, el Negrito, Mariquita the dancer, lovely but prudish, and Don Folías of the enormous nose. Prieto writes also of those "out of the way, barn-like barracks" in which there gathered, night after night, a heterogeneous crowd, to be stirred to the core with patriotic fervor, by the rousing speeches of the puppets. About 1848 Juan de Colonia, a traveling showman who played fairy-tale pieces, devised a skit which he took around the squares of Mexico City to influence a municipal election. In the 1860's Leandro Rosete Aranda and his three brothers, all originally from Huamantla, made their fortune with string-puppet productions which dramatized native festivals and sports. These brothers founded a dynasty of puppet showmen, and inspired such notable authors as Ignacio M. Altamirano and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera to write encomiums of their work. In the second half of this century, the French who accompanied Maximilian in his ill-fated venture, brought Guignols or hand-puppets to Mexico, a type hitherto unknown to the country. Shows with hand-puppet characters like Juan Juanillo and Nana Cota toured the remoter provinces on mule-back, protected by large umbrellas from the rays of the tropical sun.

Though of recent acclimatization, these hand-puppets too became traditional. They furnished the form for the Theatre El Nahual, which began humbly enough in 1933, in a dark, dank shop at Mixcalco 12 in Mexico City. Having managed to eke out its precarious existence, playing in schools and in plazas, before poor and rich, traveling by train, automobile, and horseback, in the Capital and in the provinces, it today operates under the Ministry of Education. It is rooted in the soil, drawing its dramatic material from ancient legends and folk tales, from ballads and the life of the people; thus it contributes its small share toward maintaining the culture of the Republic. And it hopes that it may raise Mexican puppetry to a new level of social meaning and artistic competence, through the collaboration of outstanding painters, writers, and actors. Their talents have endowed its puppets with vivid personality, and created types which picture the national character.

Throughout the history of Mexico, therefore, puppetry has been alive. It manifests itself in diverse forms and styles. As the train stops at Celaya, Irapuato, Salamanca, Queretaro, at Tlaquepaque, Sayula, Zapopán, peddlers on the station platform



cry their wares and offer the puppets which are made locally. In Mexico City, Oaxaca, Toluca, one stumbles upon them in the markets, almost runs into them as they hang from wires in little shops. Such holidays as Holy Week, Corpus Christi, and All Souls' Day, find them in full array, ready to be taken home for a penny or two to the children for their toy stages, improvised from boxes or whatever is handy.

What beautifully carved and colored wooden horses come from Irapuato! Strings pass down their supporting sticks to move their heads, legs, and the arms of their riders. From Salamanca come monkeys on a pole and Apache guitarists, liveliest of toys. The Capital provides jumping-jack skeletons or caricatures of political personages (appropriately pulled by strings) all cut from cardboard. Then there are the delicate figures of Puebla, whose form is legion, and the sun-baked clay puppets of Toluca and Metepec, crude but teeming with earthy vigor. Whether made from clay, wood, rags, or corn-husks, these creatures of fantasy, birds, animals, half-human monkeys, witches, demons, and ghosts, have the quality of seeming alive. The native craftsman displays his genius in devising their

*characters*

articulation. His fertile invention, sense of beauty, and aboriginal's unselfconscious skill, resolve every technical and artistic problem. The Mexican puppet-maker has his finger on the pulse of life; with absolute freedom he transmits it to his puppets.

Roberto Lago

Mexico City, October 1941



## Plates

Let me here thank Lola V. Cueto for her collaboration in making the drawings for this book. They catch with grace and uttermost comprehension the likeness of their subjects.

R. L.

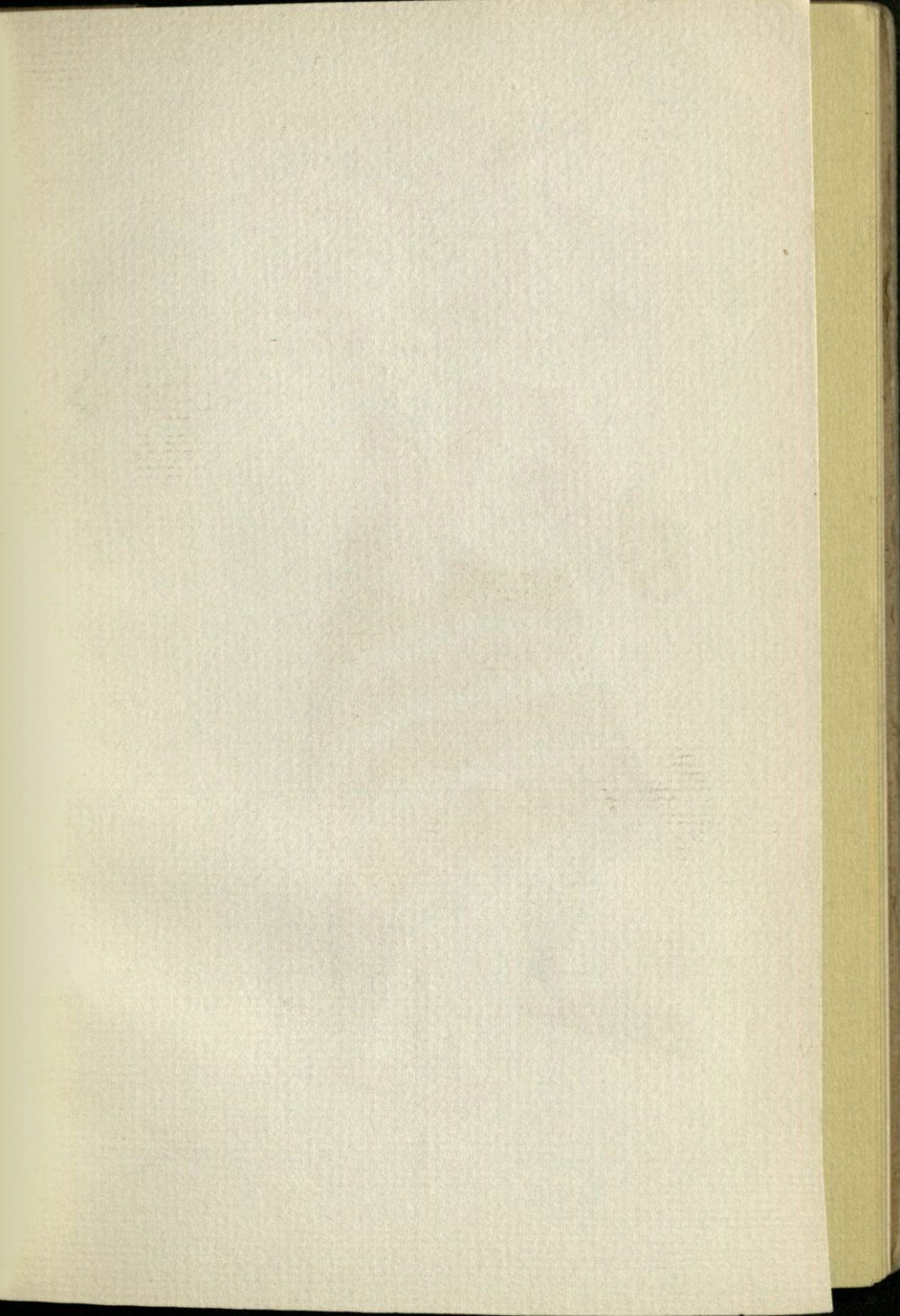
### *Title-page*

- ACROBAT. Clay, wood, and rag. *Metepec.*
1. APACHE WITH GUITAR. Wood, cloth, feathers. Rod-and-string. *Salamanca.*
  2. ANOTHER APACHE. Wood, fur, feathers. Rod-and-string. *Salamanca.*
  3. MAN AND WOMAN with back-packs. Cornhusk. *Ocotlán.*
  4. KING AND QUEEN of Francisca Pulido Cuevas. Wood and cloth. Single string. *Querétaro.*
  5. DEVIL AND DEATH of Francisca Pulido Cuevas. Wood and cloth. Single string. *Querétaro.*
  6. SKELETONS. Clay and wire. String-puppets. *Puebla.*
  7. CAT CLOWN. Clay and cloth. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
  8. CAMEL AND NEGRO. Clay, wire, cloth. String-puppets. *Puebla.*

9. CHARRO AND MONKEY. Wood, fur. Rod-and-string. *Irapuato, Salamanca.*
10. CHARRO. Wood. Rod-and-string. *Irapuato.*
11. WITCH on broomstick. Cornhusk. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
12. CANTINFLAS, popular character. Clay, cloth. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
13. PASCOLA YAQUI DEER-DANCER of Juan Guerrero. Wood, cloth. Rod-and-string. *Sonora.*
14. MONKEY ACROBAT. Clay, rag, wire. Turns by pushing ball. *Metepéc.*
15. CANNIBAL. Clay and cloth. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
16. CROCODILE. Clay, paper, cloth. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
17. ELEPHANT. Clay. String-puppet. *Puebla.*
18. HAND-PUPPETS. Papier-mâché and cloth. *Queretaro.*
19. DANCING MOUSE AND FROG of Lola Cueto. Cloth. Hand-puppets. *El Nahual.*
20. INDIAN WOMAN AND CHILD of Angelina Beloff. Wood and cloth. Hand-puppet. *El Nahual.*
21. PAYASITO of Roberto Lago. Wood and cloth. Hand-puppet. *El Nahual.*



22. DANCING HENS of Lola Cueto. Cloth. Hand-puppets. *El Nahual*.
23. FOX AND ROOSTER. Cloth. Hand-puppets. *El Nahual*.
24. FIRULEQUE of Lola Cueto. Wood and cloth. Hand-puppet. *El Nahual*.
25. WITCH, designed by Gabriel Fernández Ledesma. Cardboard. Rod-and-string. *Mexico City*.
26. TAMER AND LION of Lola Cueto and Roberto Lago. Wood and cloth. Hand-puppets. *El Nahual*.
27. LUPE of Lola Cueto. Cloth. Hand-puppet. *El Nahual*.











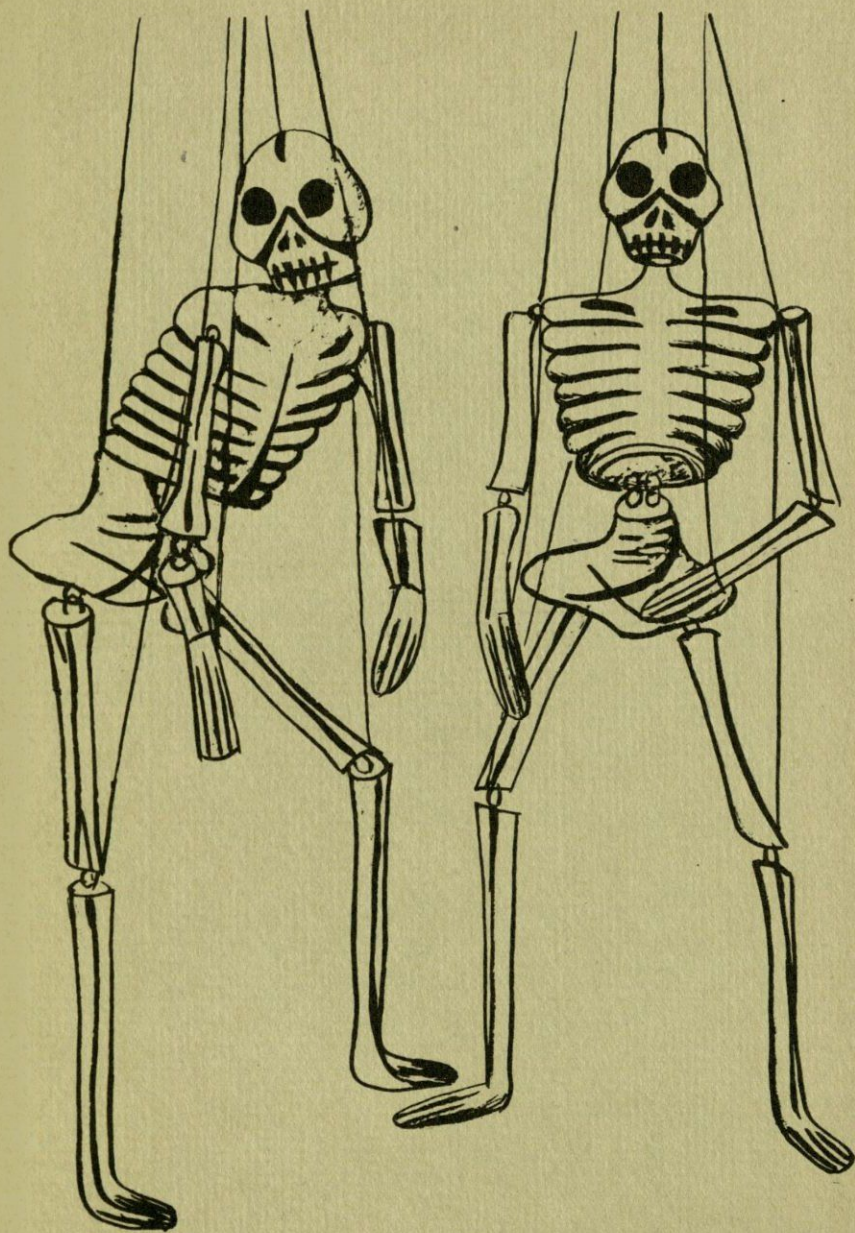




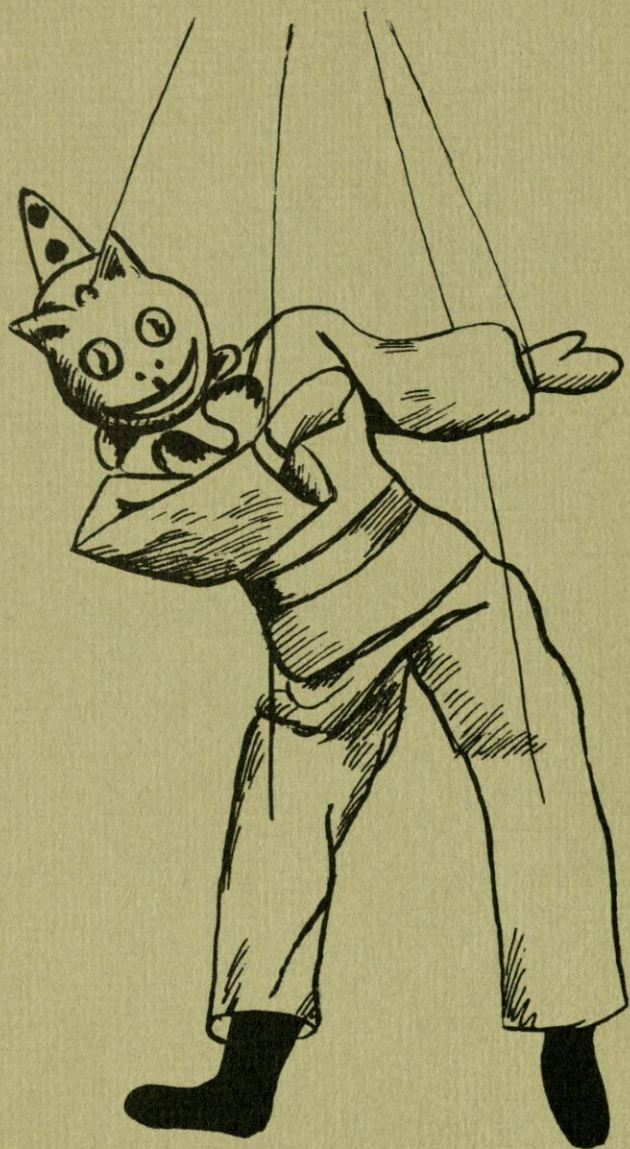


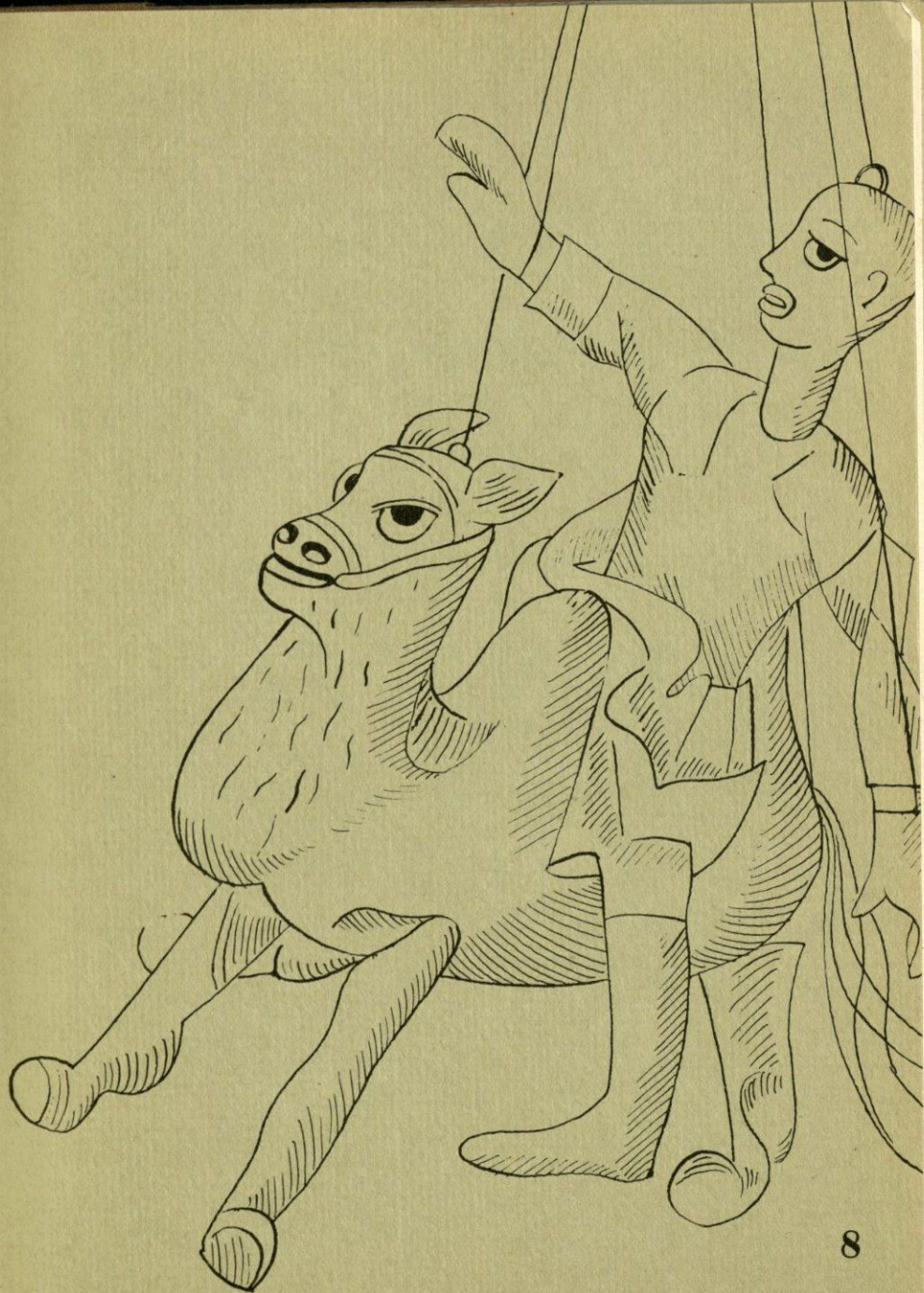




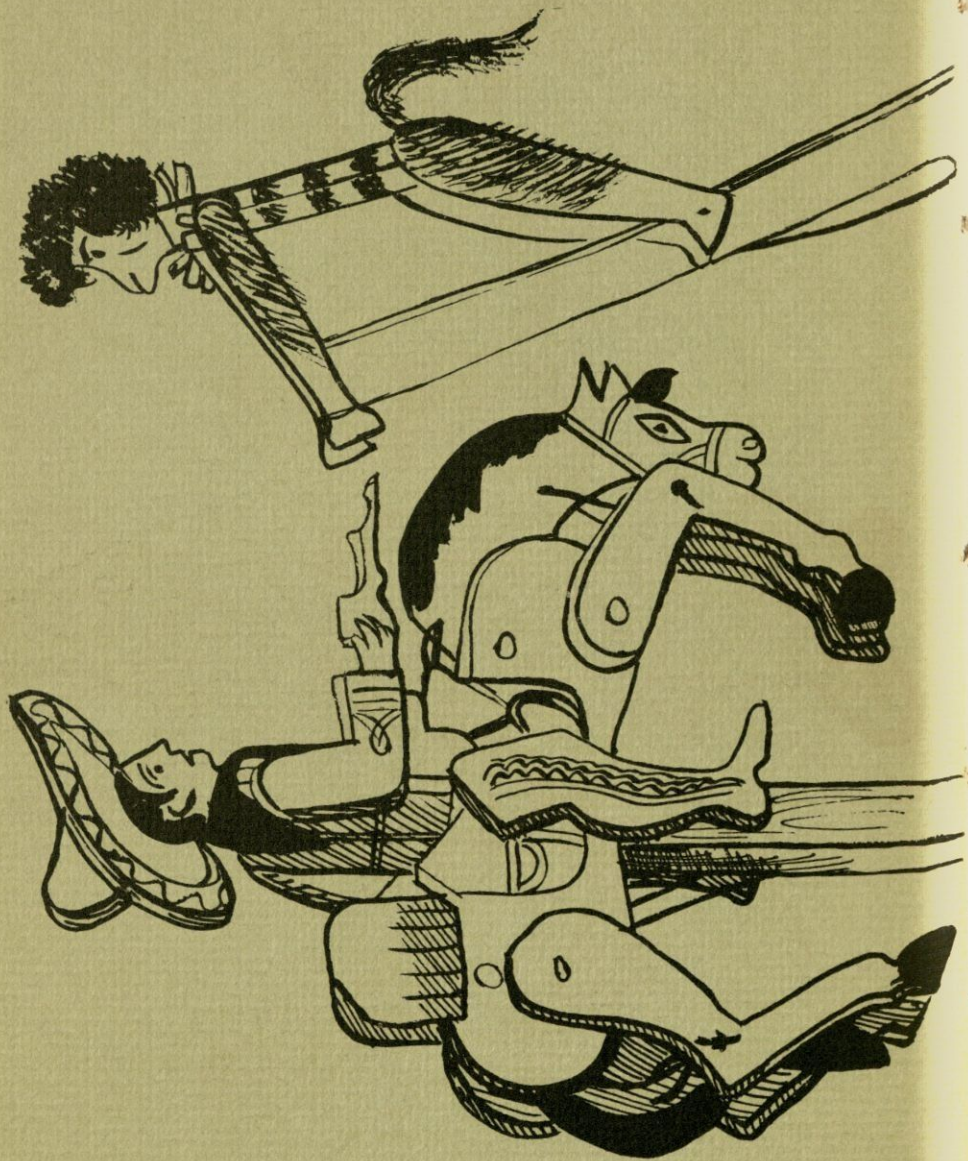


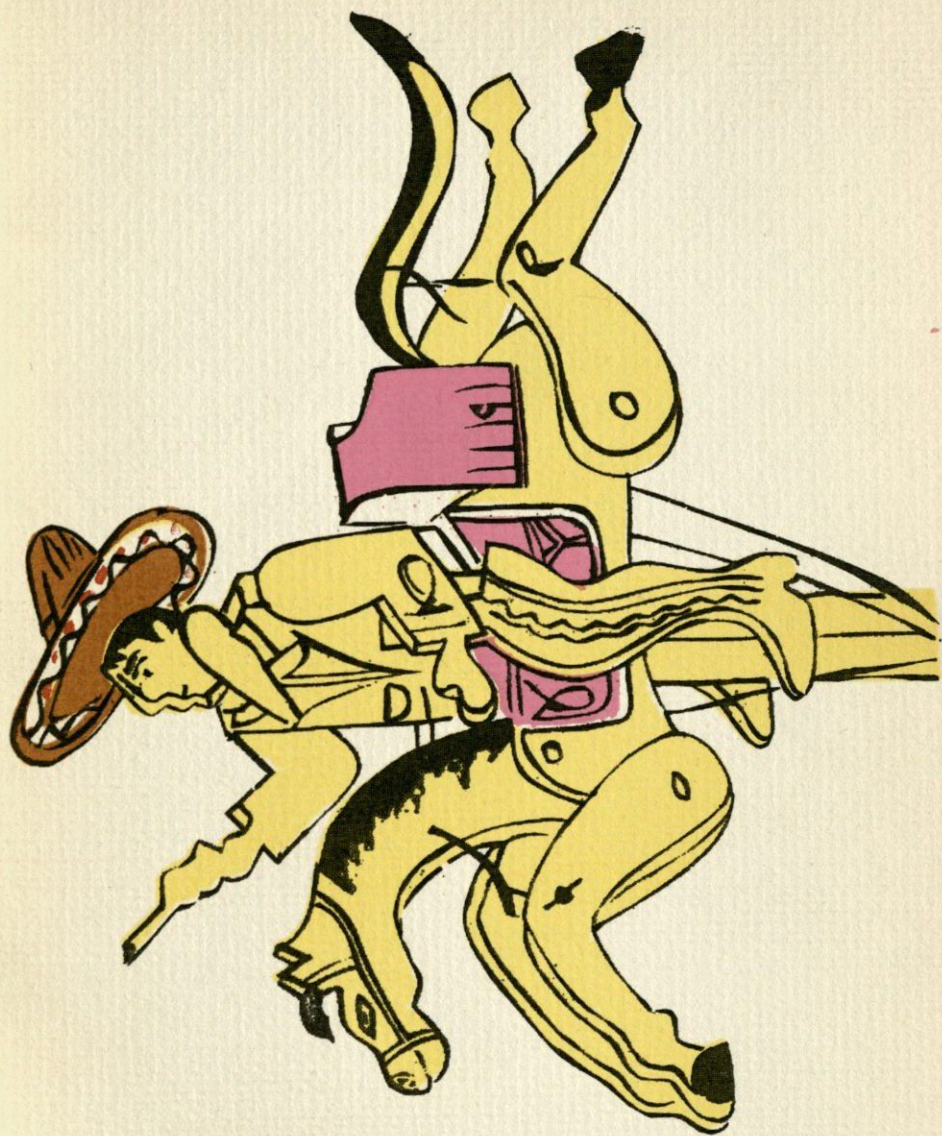












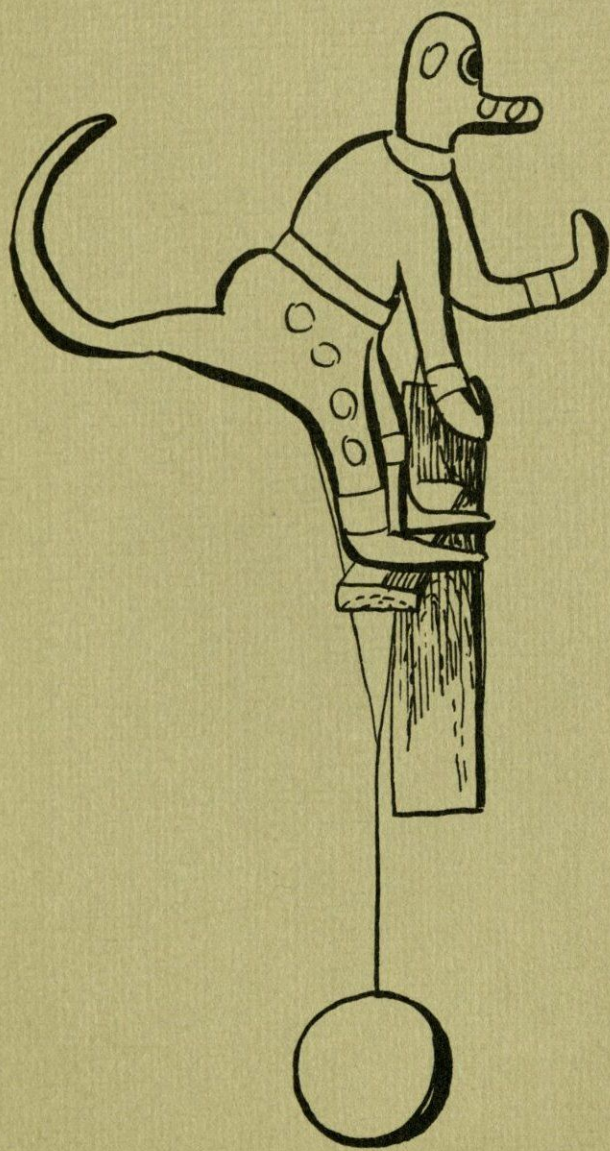






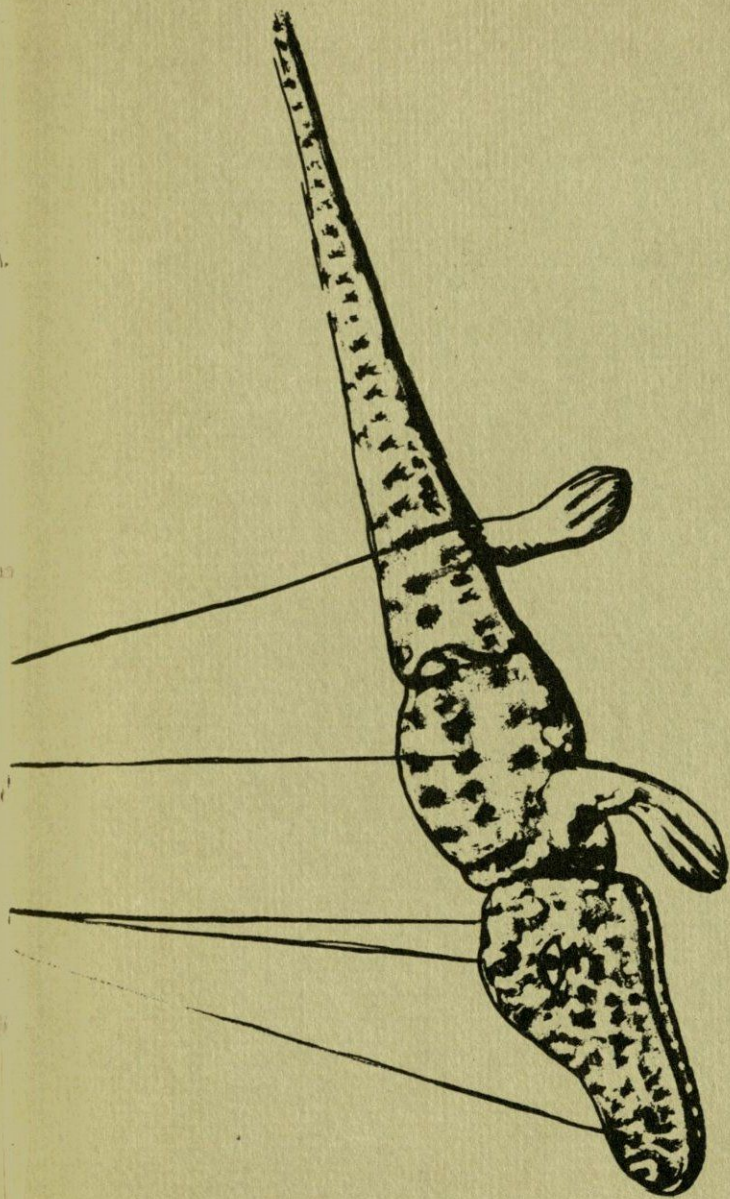




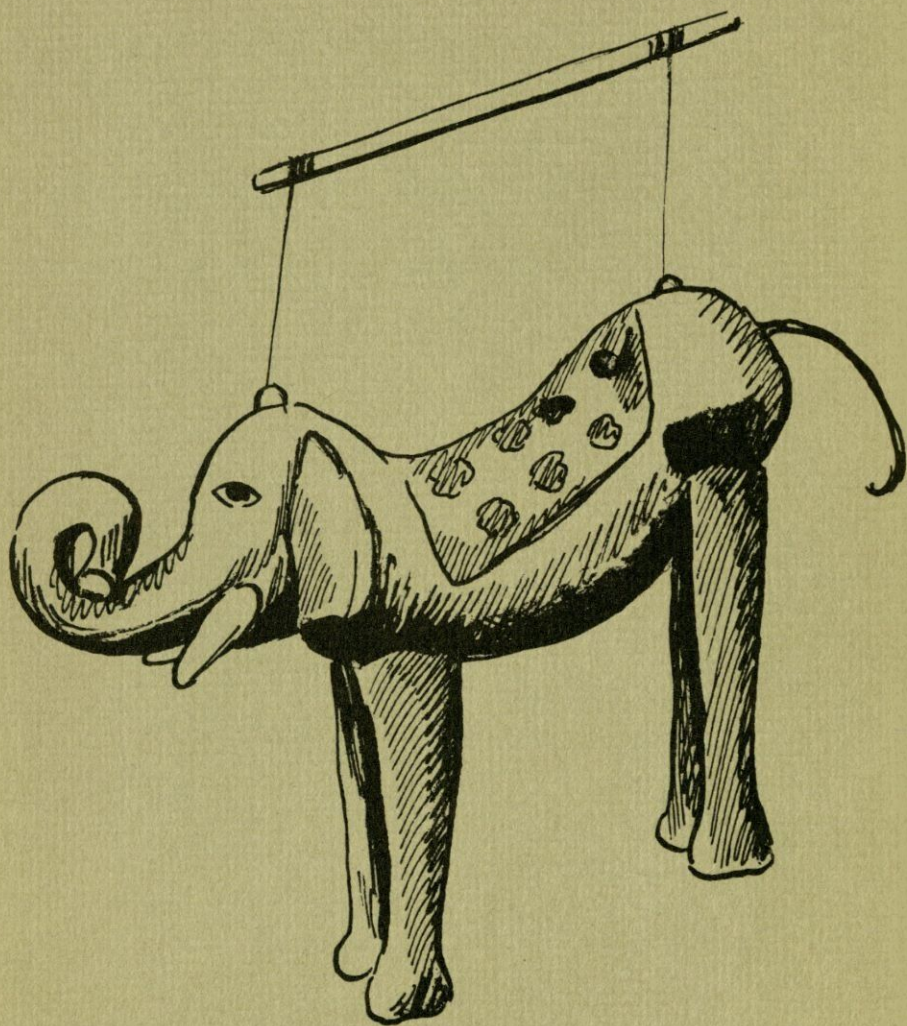




















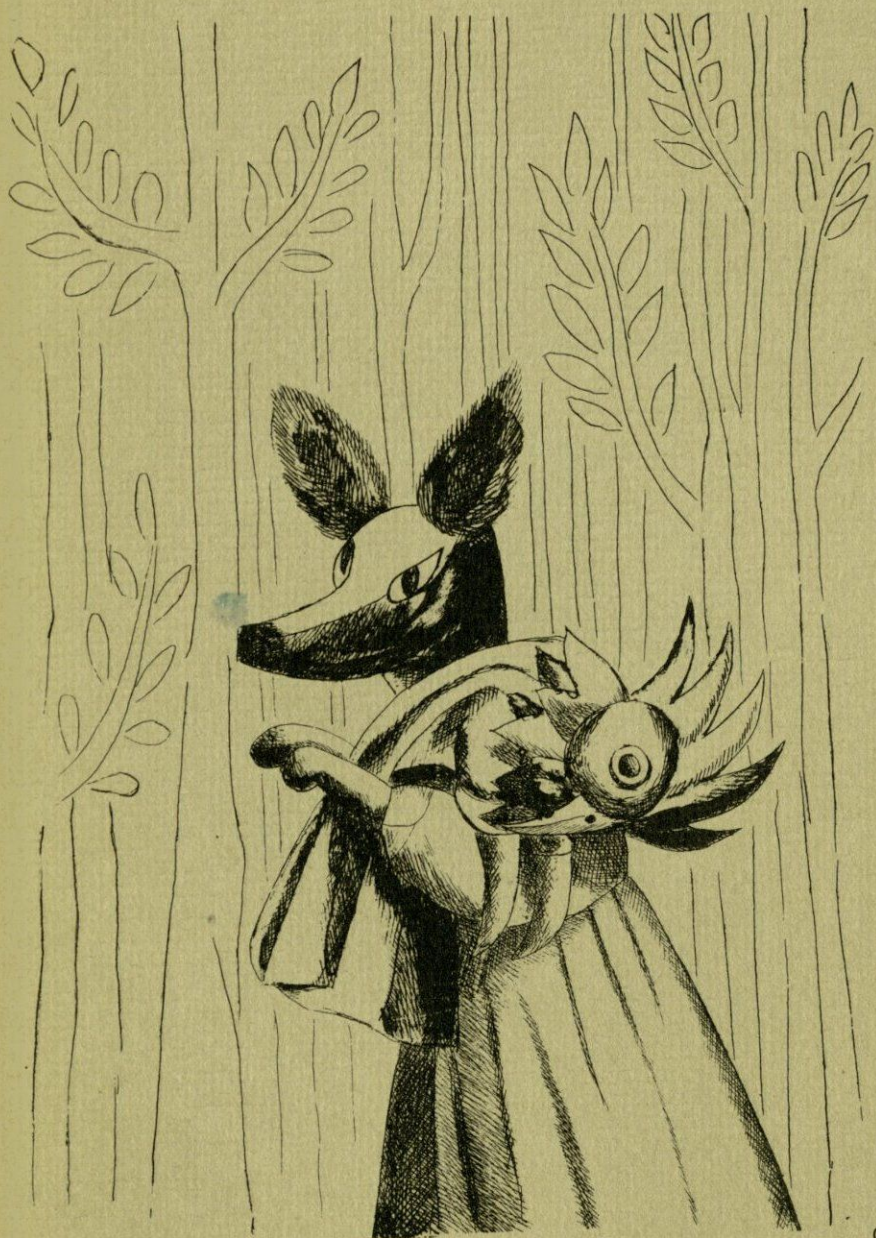




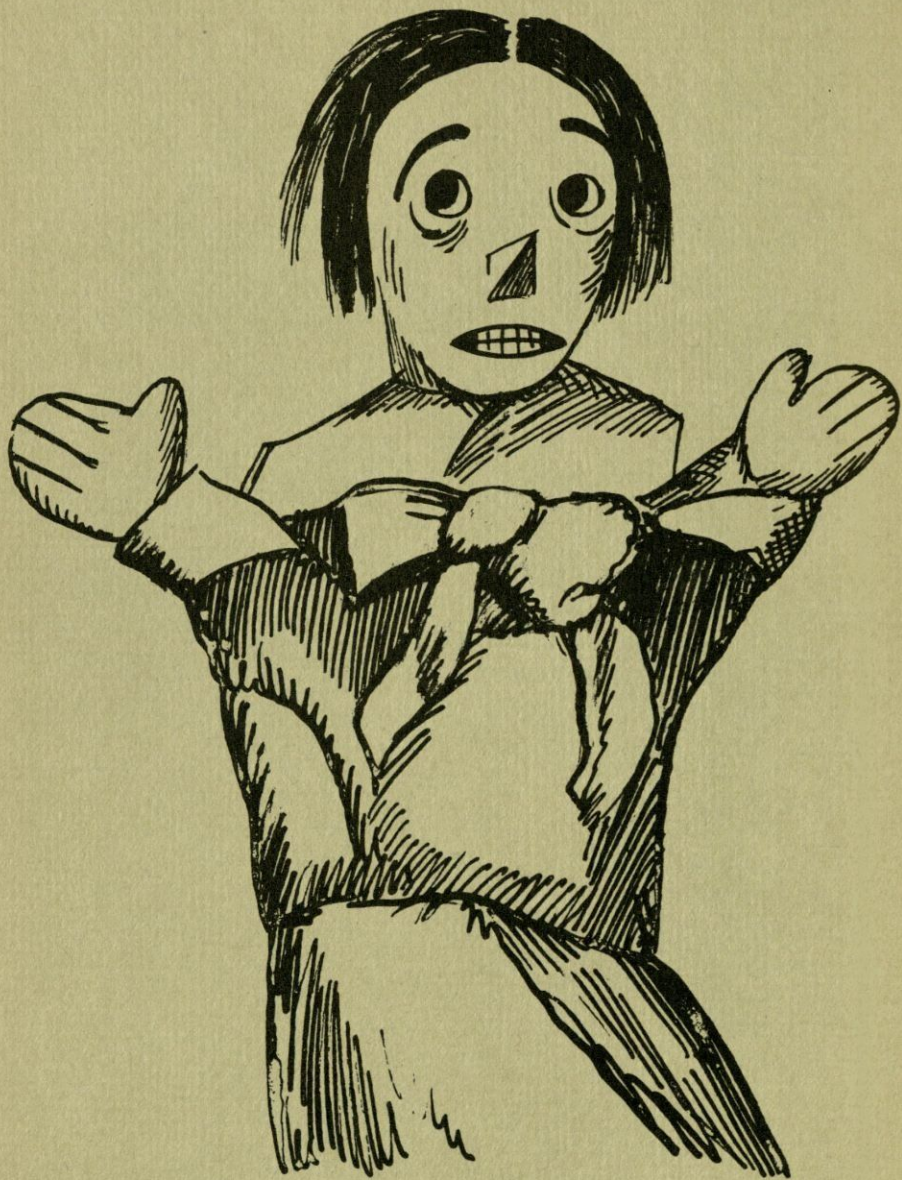


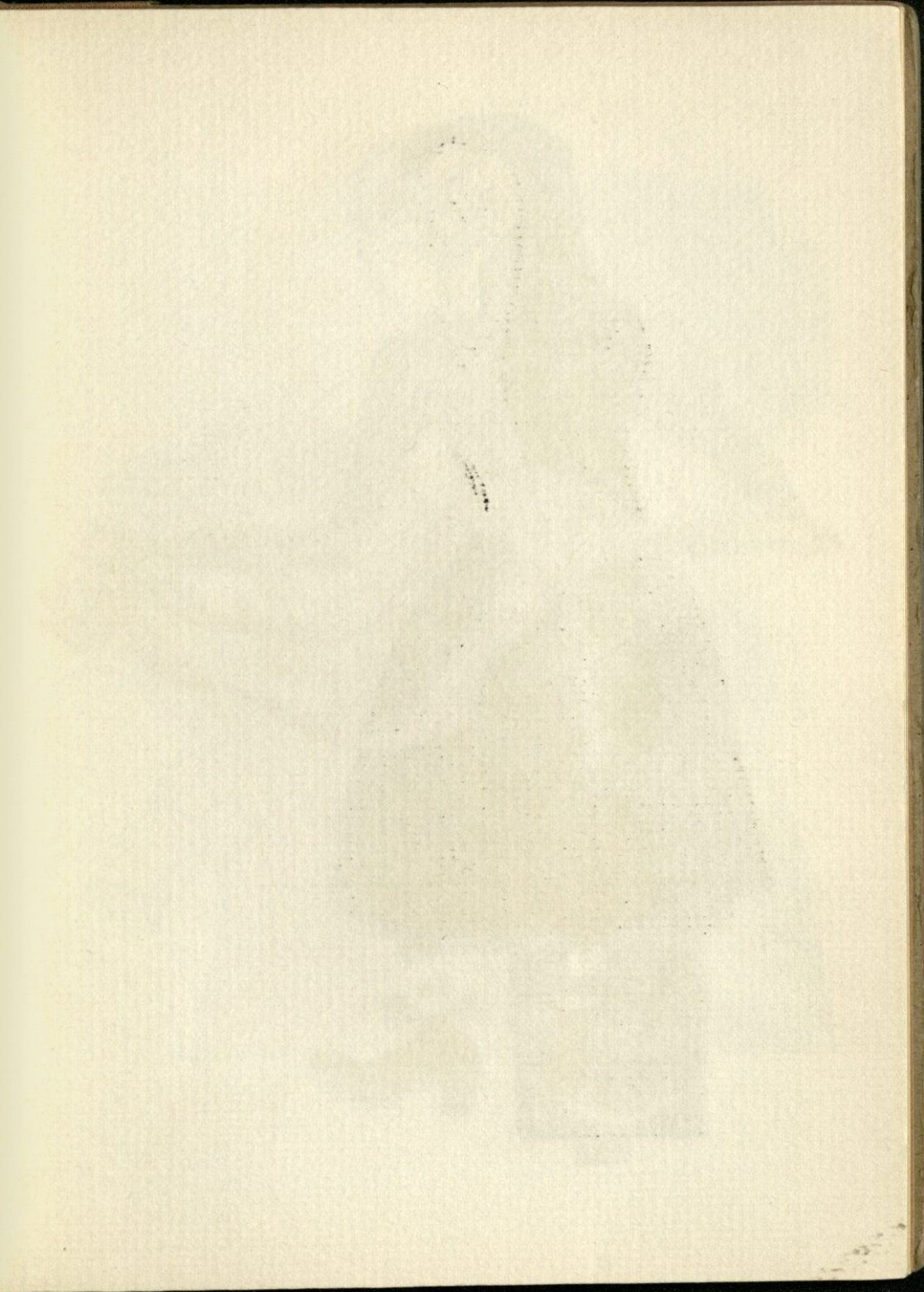










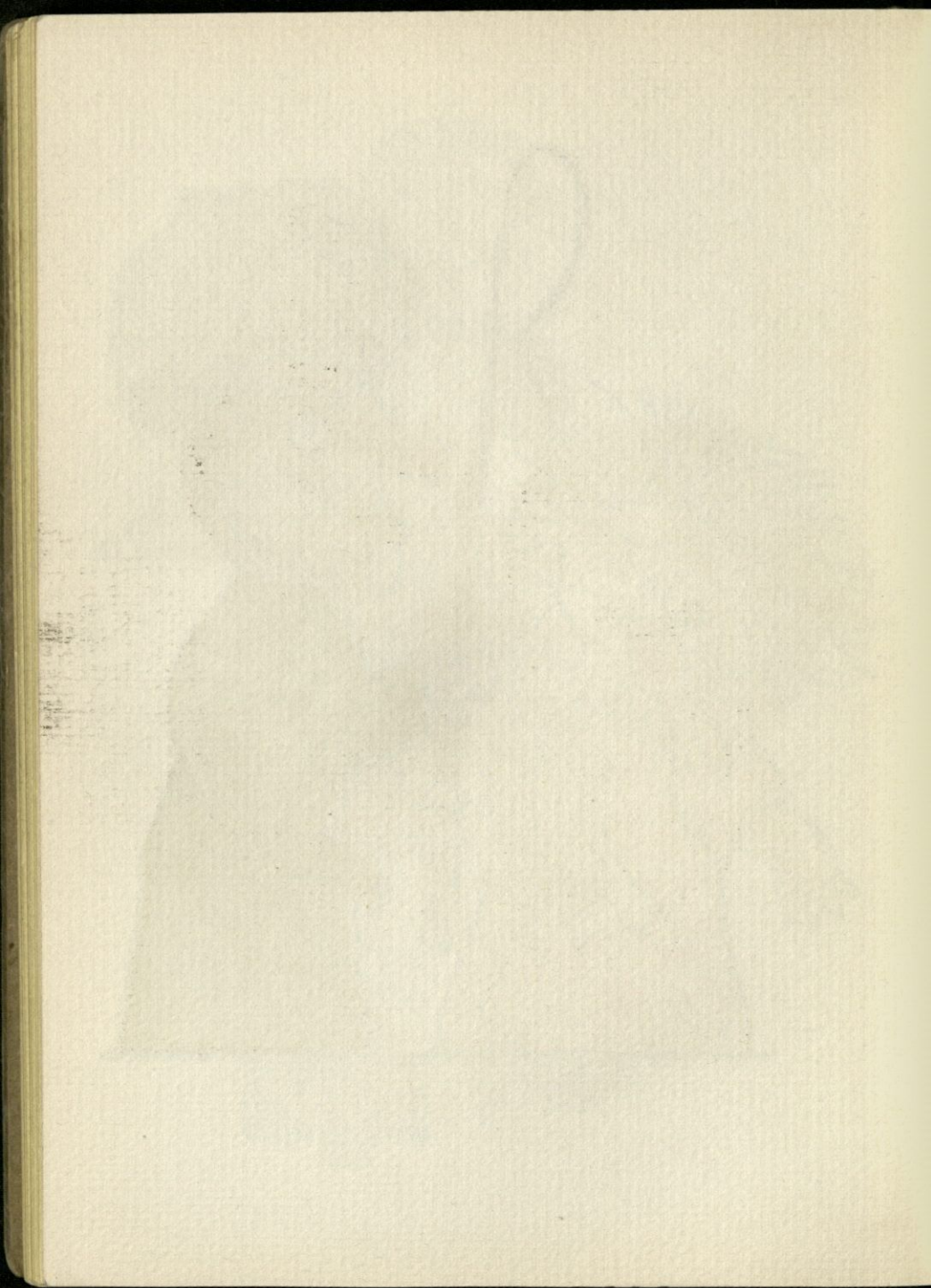
















Of this book designed by Paul McPharlin there have been printed 600 copies on Georgian paper in Egmont Bold types. The color plates were printed by silk-screen by Ignascio Velasco and George Harsha, Detroit.

